

## **Latin American Literature from Antiquity to Modern Times**

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*The past and present intermingle in the lives of Latin Americans.  
This interweaving of diverse elements is a hallmark of Latin  
American culture.*

~ Richard Boehm

### **INTRODUCTION**

I've always been fascinated with topics of anthropology and ancient civilizations. I've always found it amazing how people and cultures established advanced civilizations in times that pre-date anything we are moderately familiar with today. In college, this fascination flourished into a sincere curiosity that led me to focus my studies on psychology and history. In college I was able to apply a knowledgeable background to the research that started out as a mere hobby. During the summer of my junior year, I was approached with an opportunity to travel to Belize, Central America. How wonderful an experience it was! With a few good Belizean friends from college, we drove from Houston, straight through Mexico, to Punta Gorda, Belize, Central America. The road trip was amazing! We soaked in all of the beautiful landscape as we drove along the Eastern coast of Mexico. It was in Belize that I first encountered the magic of the Mayan pyramids of Altun Ha and Caracol as well as other archeological zones such as Xunantunich and Lamanai. Needless to say, this further magnified my desire to study ancient Mesoamerica.

I stayed in Belize for two years, and since my Belizean experience, I've returned to Mexico not only to visit other Aztec and Mixtec ruins but also to study Spanish. For the past two summers, I've participated in an immersion program in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This program at IDEAL Latin America has improved my fluency in the Spanish language considerably and increased my knowledge in Spanish culture and history. Johnston Middle School has a diverse Hispanic student population of more than 30% with origins from all over Latin America. I've found that all of my travel and experiences have helped to promote a cultural bond with these students. They love to hear entertaining stories of my encounters with the language, food, people, and my explorations of the breathtaking archaeological sites and museums.

### **BENEFITS TO STUDENTS**

One of the things I find missing in many of my students is the personal pursuit of excellence. There is a lethargy that is very disturbing to me. It is the greatest challenge as a teacher to inspire in them the values of education and the appreciation of knowledge. As a middle school reading teacher, I have a responsibility to bring culturally diverse literature to my students. Considering the fact that my classroom population include equal numbers of Black, White, and Hispanic students, I feel it is most appropriate to teach stories that each group can relate to personally, culturally, and cross-culturally. Presenting a culturally specific text will not only let members of that race feel ownership towards the story but also give others a literary glimpse of a different world. My ultimate goal is to take students on a literary time machine where modern

Mesoamericans can find personal connections to the past and become empowered through the knowledge and history of their ancestry. I am excited that a curriculum of this nature would build character and self-esteem to numerous Johnston students whose cultural backgrounds stem from different countries in Latin America. In my travels and studies I've acquired ample amounts of information to incorporate into my unit such as books, pictures, souvenirs, videos, and other facts and resources that would enhance my curriculum unit thus allowing me to provide first hand information about ancient Mesoamerican art, history, and culture; to give a realistic dimension to the work of all students; and to encourage my Latino students to link their personal knowledge with what we are studying.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

“Latin American Literature from Antiquity to Modern Times” will introduce students to the history, culture and traditions of the Ancient Americas. In a comparative study, this unit will allow students to parallel Pre-Columbian fables and folklore with works of modern Spanish literature. “Think of the *Popol Vuh* and the *Story of Eight Deer* as the Pre-Columbian *Iliad* and *Odyssey* - they served as the touchstone texts for these people's world” (Koontz).

Students will have the opportunity to explore the codices of *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer* and *Popol Vuh* in their original hieroglyphic text. We will then cross-reference these ancient epic tales with progressive literary works penned by poet Octavio Paz, the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature recipient and award-winning novelist Pam Munoz Ryan's most recent publication *Becoming Naomi Leon*. *Becoming Naomi Leon* is a fitting selection for this study of Pre- and Post-Columbian Latin America because it is partly set in Oaxaca, a city in central Mexico that is home to the modern descendants of ancient Mesoamerican Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations.

Furthermore, supplemental materials will be used to portray aspects of Latin American culture and introduce background information relevant to the unit. These resources will include an historical account of *Hernando Cortes' Conquest of Mexico* and *Francisco Pizarro and the Conquest of the Incas*, by Gina DeAngelis, and *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca, and Mayan Myths*, by Diana Ferguson. Additionally, students will have access to numerous artifacts, photographs, videos, and souvenirs to bring to life Hispanic culture and add realism to unit.

## **ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN EMPIRES**

Years before Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492, several ancient civilizations flourished in the area that is present-day Latin America. It is important to present an historical background of these ancient empires as evidence of their connected origins. Although they spoke different languages there was an evident cultural link uniting the Olmecs, Zapotecs, Maya, Toltecs, Mixtecs, Aztecs, and Inca. They shared a 260-day calendar, they played a particular type of ritual ball game, and they had gods in common although under different names. The civilization of each empire established the foundation of today's Latin American culture. (Boehm 220-221; Ferguson 10)

### **Early Mesoamericans: Olmecs, Zapotecs and Maya**

The Olmecs developed the earliest known Mesoamerican civilization in the region currently known as Vera Cruz, Mexico. Their presence dates back to 1200 BCE (Before the Common Era) around the same time as Tutankhamen's reign in Egypt. Little is known about the Olmecs; however, it has been discovered that they built cities and used a system of inscribed signs and religious symbols, many of which influenced later Mesoamerican cultures. The Olmecs most notable remnants are the magnificently sculptured colossal heads carved with stone tools and blocks of stone weighing up to 36,000 pounds. Research shows that the Olmec culture died out by 400 BCE.

By 600 BCE, the ancient civilization of the Zapotecs began flourishing in the highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico. The Zapotecs are known to have been quite knowledgeable in astronomy, which led to the development of possibly the first Mesoamerican calendar. Zapotec culture is still alive in Oaxaca today.

The Maya emerged in southern Mexico and northern Central America during the Late Pre-Classic period (300 BCE – 200 CE). However, “the golden age of the Maya came in the Classic period (200 BCE – 900 BCE) when their civilization was centered in the lowland rainforests of northern Guatemala” (Ferguson 11). The Maya were skilled builders and established many cities, the greatest of which was Tikal, located in Guatemala. The Maya were also very sophisticated astronomers, inventive mathematicians and pioneering scribes. Mayan scribes invented a version of syllabic writing that included logographs or word pictures and other syllabic and semantic symbols. This breakthrough in writing allowed belief systems to be documented as well as the recording of historical events that could be passed on to future generations.

For reasons that are still a mystery, the Maya eventually abandoned their cities, which over time became lost beneath the vegetation of the rain forest. Researchers have uncovered the ruins of over 40 Mayan cities, but most of the glyphs remain untranslated” (Boehm 221). “One modern book that bridges the gap between hieroglyphic records and modern texts is the *Popol Vuh*” (Ferguson 16). This Maya creation myth is the foundation of most Native American religious, philosophical, and ethical beliefs. The *Popol Vuh* begins with the creation of the world and concludes with the victory of Hero Twins over the evil lords of the Underworld. Descendants of the Maya still live in villages in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize. “They speak over thirty different Maya languages and are the inheritors of traditions and religious beliefs going back centuries” (Ferguson 12)

### **Late Mesoamericans: Toltecs, Mixtecs and Aztecs**

As the Classic Maya civilization began to decline, the Early Post Classic period (900 -1200 CE) gave birth to other up and coming powers: Toltecs, Mixtecs and Aztecs. The Toltecs built their capital city named Tula just seventy miles north of what is known today as Mexico City. Tula is known to have been ruled by a succession of nine kings, all bearing the divine title ‘Quetzalcoatl’ to signify their godlike status:

The highest ranked royal Mixtec dynasty rose to power in Tilantongo during Mesoamerica’s Post Classic period between 950-1521 A.D. Alliances with the Tolteca and Zapotecs, allowed the Mixtec to influence the modern Mexican states of Oaxaca and Puebla where a quarter million Mixtec people still reside today. (Pohl, *John Pohl’s Mesoamerica*)

The Mixtecs were formidable enemies of the Aztecs whose capital was Tenochtitlán located in the Valley of México. They fought many wars against Aztec imperial armies throughout the fifteenth century. The Aztec developed a highly structured class system headed by an emperor and military officials. “High-ranking priests performed rituals to win deities’ favor and to guarantee good harvests” (Boehm 221). The great Aztec city of Tenochtitlan was more dazzling than any European city. Populated with more than 200,000 people, its advanced architecture was engineered with canals for transportation, aqueducts that supplied freshwater, gardens, zoos, and a thriving market.

### **Inca**

The Inca civilization is known to have inhabited the western coastline of South America and the highlands of the Andes Mountains during the 1400’s. The Inca centered its capital city at Cuzco as their empire stretched for more than 2500 miles along the western edge of South America and included parts of what are known now as Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile,

and Argentina. Although the Inca established an extraordinary empire, they were not the first to occupy this region. “The Inca civilization was built on the achievements of earlier cultures such as the Chavin, Tihuanaco, Paracas, Nazca, Moche (or Mochica) and Chimu” (DeAngelis 8-9). “The Inca spoke Quechua, but never developed a system of writing. Instead they used a device called *quipu*, a cord with knotted strings of different colors and lengths to record statistical information and Inca mythology and history” (Ferguson 16).

## **CONQUEST OF MESOAMERICA**

Beginning with Christopher Columbus’ voyages from 1492 to 1504, Europeans explored and colonized vast areas of the Americas. The major European powers of Spain and Portugal took over huge territories from Mexico to southern South America:

As a result of these conquests, European colonies gradually arose throughout Latin America. The conquerors set up highly structured political systems and established the Roman Catholic Church as the major unifying institution in both Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Missionaries from Europe converted the Native Americas to Christianity. (Boehm 222)

### **Hernando Cortez**

Hernando Cortez (1485-1547) is perhaps one of the most famous conquistadors who brought Spanish rule to Central and South America:

The timing of Cortez’s arrival coincided with the predicted return of the god Quetzalcoatl. In 1519 Montezuma allowed Cortez to enter the city of Tenochtitlan and treated him like a god. Cortez continued to tighten his hold on Montezuma and finally made him prisoner and ruled the empire through him. (Ferguson 147)

After years of war and strife, Cortez defeated the Aztec in 1521 and claimed Mexico for Spain.

### **Francisco Pizarro**

“In 1535 another conquistador, Francisco Pizarro (1478-1541), destroyed the Incan Empire in Peru and began Spain and Portugal’s South American empire” (Boehm 222). Pizarro and his troops arrived in Ecuador in 1531 and marched into the Incan empire already weakened by civil unrest. They executed the Incan ruler Atahualpa in 1533 and advanced to the capital of Cuzco. The end of the Incan empire was marked once the Spanish took control of Cuzco and Pizarro was named governor of Peru.

## **ANCIENT AMERICA IN MODERN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Nearly three centuries after the conquest and colonization of Latin America, the children of the conquistadores and colonizadores began crafting their own Hispanoamericana identity – the very identity that would make Latinos in the United States so resilient. (Figueredo 97)

The significance in connecting Pre-Columbian art and culture to the Latin American culture of modern times is to give young people a sense of history and ancestry. This knowledge of the past can empower students to believe in themselves and strive to be more than what their environment may impress upon them to be.

For centuries, the arts and literature of Latin America were shaped by European styles. Today’s Latin American artists and writers have developed styles that often reflect their diverse ethnic heritages, blending European styles with those of Native American cultures.” (Boehm 228)

## ***BECOMING NAOMI LEON SYNOPSIS***

The following synopsis was adapted from information provided by the Pam Munoz Ryan website and a review by Sally Tibbetts on [Kidsreads.com](http://Kidsreads.com):

Pam Munoz Ryan's inspiration for this book began while reading about Oaxacan wood carving. She says:

I came across a one-line reference to the Night of the Radishes. The event sounded so magical I knew I had to see it. In 1997, on the 100th Anniversary of La Noche de los Rabanos, I visited the romantic and mysterious Oaxaca City, a feast of colors, tastes, pageantry, and festivals. When I began writing Naomi's story and she evolved into a soap carver, my imagination rushed me back to Oaxaca. Or was it Oaxaca's spell that first mesmerized me, and inspired the lioness, Naomi Leon? (Ryan website)

The main character in this novel has had a lot to contend with in her young life. Her name, Naomi Soledad León Outlaw, isolates her as an extraordinary individual. She also wears polyester hand-sewn clothes, has a difficulty speaking up, and has timid demeanor, all of which label her among her classmates as “nobody special” (Ryan website).

Nonetheless, Naomi’s life at Avocado Acres Trailer Rancho in Lemon Tree, California, with Gram and her little brother, Owen, is happy, and Gram tells Naomi that most problems can be overcome with positive thinking. Luckily, Naomi also has her soap carving, a talent at which she excels. Seven years after Naomi’s mother disappeared, she reappears, “stirring up all sorts of questions and challenging Naomi to discover and proclaim who she really is” (Ryan website).

Skyla (the mother) announces that she wants to get to know her children. It doesn't take anyone long to realize that Skyla has other motives. “Skyla has come with no other reason than to find a baby-sitter for her boyfriend's child, and very soon Gram and the children are in danger of being separated” (Tibbetts).

Conflict progresses and the family set out on a search for the children’s father in the Mexican city of Oaxaca. “Each year in Oaxaca, there are soap-carving competitions, and their natural father Santiago, a renowned artist himself, is said to live there. This is where they eventually meet up and where Naomi's carving skills are richly rewarded” (Tibbetts).

According to Sally Tibbetts, “One of the fun elements in this fine book is the way each chapter is headed with titles such as ‘A Rabble of Yesterdays,’ ‘A Passel of Todays’ and ‘A Drey of Squirrels.’ Somehow these headings fit beautifully into the action of the story. Along with this, Naomi is a keeper of very creative lists --- some are word lists and some are for other subjects she cares about.” These lists include soap carving, worrying, and making lists.

### **EXPLORING THEMES IN *BECOMING NAOMI LEON***

Below is a list of themes that are prevalent throughout all of Pam Munoz Ryan’s novels. These themes, outlined by [Scholastic.com](http://Scholastic.com), provide a framework to use when asking questions to spark discussions about *Becoming Naomi Leon*. I aim to guide students in analyzing these same themes in a comparison of the themes interpreted in our readings of Pre-Columbian folklore.

#### **Names**

How important is a name? Does a name make a person or does a person make the name? Why does Naomi say that her "biggest problem" is her last name, and yet Gram is proud of the name Outlaw? Why does Terri Lynn change her name to Skyla? How does a name affect a person, a place, or an object? How are names important in your own life?

## **Journeys**

Journeys are central in each of these stories. Discuss the ways in which each journey affects the characters — Naomi, Owen, and Gram's journey to Mexico. How does an actual journey help bring about changes in a character's life and affect the struggles each has to face?

## **Freedom**

In Naomi's story, the theme of Freedom emerges: freedom to determine your own destiny, to be in charge of your own life rather than allowing others to control you. Compare the amount of control each character has over their destiny. Compare the different ways they each find to take control. How would you react if you found yourself in their shoes?

## **Goals**

Naomi and her family each has an important goal they are working toward: Naomi wants to stay with Gram and Owen. Her mother wants to please her boyfriend. How does each of them work toward her goal? What are the personality traits and outside forces for each of these characters that help her reach her goals? How does working toward a goal contribute to each character's sense of him or herself?

## **Family**

There are many different types of family. Compare the family situations Gram, Owen, Naomi and her mother. How does each character's family — or lack of family — affect his or her life? Who do you think are the strongest mother figures? Who do you think are the strongest father figures? How does each of these characters feel about her family, and whom does each character count on the most? What does "family" mean to you?

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIT**

My yearly lesson plan generally consists of reading five to six novels with direct focus on comprehension, vocabulary, literary elements, literary devices, writing activities, and other special projects. I will simply include a Latin American segment within my usual teaching format and dedicate four to six weeks to teaching this unit. I predict that the same amount of time used to present a novel unit – six to eight weeks – could be dedicated to teaching this unit. My usual unit format includes a series of pre-reading activities, quick research assignments, individual reading, classroom discussions, and homework that reinforces comprehension. I will divide the novel into several sections and create a worksheet based on the *Novel-Ties* format that my students are familiar with. This format includes the introduction of new vocabulary, an understanding of language, questions that review comprehension, exercises that reinforce knowledge of literary elements and devices, writing activities that promote higher-order thinking and discussions of opinion, development of new ideas, and personal experiences and current events that are directly related what was read. These components will be integrated into the daily lesson plan. In addition to the numerous classroom activities that can be created from this unit, the personal involvement required for the unit can generate heightened interest in topics explored. The reading selections will be further enhanced with Internet web quests and power point presentations where students are guided to search through links and slides with additional information related to the unit. These activities will take students on a virtual tour of Latin America enabling them to make a visual connection to the land and culture of Latin America. Research may segue into other academic content areas that will spawn an interdisciplinary experience (Cottrell 185). What follows is a description of the importance of these concepts in detail.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

These activities will provide an introduction to the unit's time period, history, society, settings, and geography. They will also allow students to relate these aspects of Ancient America to their personal experiences and modern times. Resources used will include a timeline of Mesoamerica, synopsis of the novel, Internet web-quest, archeological magazines, videos, personal interviews of family members and other member of the community, and classroom discussions.

Good readers relate what they've read to what they already know. They ask themselves questions, make initial predictions, and create meanings as they move through a text. Good readers also know that as they read, they will likely change their mind about some of their early ideas and assumptions (TAKS 16).

## VOCABULARY/LANGUAGE

Our comparative study will acknowledge similarities between ancient dialect and modern day Spanish in a language study that will analyze Ancient American hieroglyphs, figurative language and vocabulary that is exclusive to the particular time period and social setting. It will be helpful to explore these concepts beforehand in order for students to obtain a true understanding of dialogue presented in the Pre-Columbian fables, and the modern literary works. The vocabulary assignments will allow students to gain understanding through activities that incorporate matching synonyms, antonyms, inference through context clues, word analogies, language and word study, fill in the blank and fun crossword puzzles. As mentioned in the *TAKS Information Booklet for Reading Grade 6*, "In order to develop an initial understanding of what they read, students must be able to use context and other word identification strategies to help them understand the meaning of the words they read" (TAKS 10).

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

These questions will cover all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure all students are challenged to exhibit higher order thinking. Questions will extend beyond surface level thinking and instead require students to think outside of the box. Students will also learn to write their own questions using a strategy called Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) developed by Taffy Raphael:

Raphael classifies questions into two broad categories: **Text Explicit Questions** and **Text Implicit Questions**. With text explicit questions, information for generating the question and answer are found directly in the text. Text implicit questions require students to take what they know from the story and relate it to their personal experiences and ideas (Santos 41, 43).

This statement further supports the standard promoted by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that effective readers are able to answer their own questions, think critically about what they've read, develop their own interpretations, and use relevant parts of the text to support these interpretations (TAKS 16).

## LITERARY ELEMENTS

Comparing ancient literary works to modern ones will be a great hands-on opportunity to highlight similar concepts of plot, setting, point of view, characterization, themes, tone, mood, climax, and various other literary elements. Student activities used will include plot diagrams, character analysis charts, character interviews to exercise point of view, and discussions of theme, conflict, and resolution. Once young readers develop an understanding of literary elements, they are more likely to develop an intense interest and a sense of meaning in the stories they read. As

these readers learn to make connections between events, characters, and other elements of a story, they will naturally relate what they have read to their own lives and experiences. Consequently, awareness of a story's characters, setting, and problems gives students an opportunity to relate to the story in concrete terms while learning about emotions and events that are beyond their own personal experiences (TAKS 12).

### **LITERARY DEVICE**

Pre-Columbian folklore and modern works including Latin-American writers and poets are full of devices that aid in the expression of Latino culture. Traits such as similes, metaphors, personification, allusion, flashback, and foreshadowing are consistent throughout these works and will provide opportunities for great discussions. Other literary devices reinforced by the exploration of Pre-Columbian fables and modern literary works include analyzing characters, their traits, motivation, conflicts, and the changes undergone as the storyline and plot unfold. Students will continue to learn how to recognize plot, setting, and problem resolution in addition to interpreting literary devices such as symbolism, tone, style, and mood. Students will also become successful in applying these literary devices to understand how they contribute to the effect of the written text.

### **WRITING ACTIVITIES**

Students will be required to think and imagine how certain concepts from the unit relate to their personal experiences. It will also allow students to bring ideas that are set in the past to modern times. Creative writing topics will trigger student's imaginations to spark students' curiosity and provide motivation for writing expository essays. Types of writing assignments may include writing prompts using pictures and scenes from the *Codex Nuttall* version of *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer*. Students can attempt to interpret or recreate a story from original Mixtec hieroglyphs depicting ancient scenes.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY UNITS**

Johnston Middle School, like most other fine arts magnet schools, has a renowned visual arts department. This topic will not only motivate many of the visual arts magnet students, but will also provide additional learning experiences in art-related topics. It will also give art students an opportunity to share insight and expertise in art history with their classmates and attempt codex replications, Aztec Calendars, ceramics, and other symbols of Ancient American culture. Other students who are not enrolled in a fine arts magnet program will benefit simply from being exposed to these remarkable visual representations, perhaps for the first time. Additional interdisciplinary units can be created in conjunction with the social studies academic classes by exposing students to Latin American history and culture through activities that include relevant topics related to historical and current events, historical figures, politics, debates, issues, and even geography as it relates to the literature.

### **OBJECTIVES**

Objective related areas where this unit will be helpful to all students are numerous. Primarily, this topic will offer a better understanding of literature and culturally diverse written texts by remaining consistent with Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) objectives. As a result of mastering these objectives, students will perform better on TAKS Standardized testing and be inspired to pursue life-long learning.

1. Students will analyze characters traits, motivations, conflicts, and the changes undergone as the storyline and plot unfold.
2. Students will continue to learn how to recognize plot, setting, and problem resolution in addition to interpreting literary devices such as symbolism, tone, style, and mood.



3. Students will also become successful in applying these literary devices to understand how they contribute to the effect of the written text.
4. Students will be able to manipulate the elements of a story (characters, conflict, setting, mood, etc.) to create a new story.
5. Students will identify what motivates a character in a literary offering as well as compare and contrast the point-of-view of different characters.

## SEQUENCE OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### **Week One: Pre-reading Research to Awaken Prior Knowledge**

The first week will serve as an introduction to the unit. To get students acquainted with the learning that is about to take place, we will first discuss a variety of topics and issues that relates to them and to the story. We will also view a video that chronicles the history of Mesoamerica from the emergence of early civilizations to modern times. The major focus of this unit is the depiction of the evolution of modern Latin-American culture and literature. I'd like to open students' minds to the history of the Ancient Americas, its conquest by the Spaniards and the current development of Latin America today.

### **Week Two: *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca, and Mayan Myths, Popol Vuh, and The Legend of Lord Eight Deer***

The second week will draw students into the mythological world of the gods and heroes of Ancient America. This will be done using a collection of literary works including translated copies of the Mayan creation story *Popol Vuh* and the Mixtec epic *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer*.

The lineage of the Mixtec people and the glory of the great Mixtec warrior, Lord Eight Deer Ocelot Claw, are depicted in numerous ancient codices first discovered by anthropologist Zelia Nuttall and made popular by John M.D. Pohl as *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer*. (Pohl, *John Pohl's Mesoamerica*)

In order to give students a hands-on experience with these ancient works, they will be given the opportunity to decode original Mayan and Mixtec pictographs and attempt to create a folktale, myth or lineage depiction of their own. Continued research to reveal the glory of these once magnificent cultures will be supported with the reading of short stories from an anthology titled, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca, and Mayan Myths*. This work by Diana Ferguson is described as an evocative and vivid retelling of ancient myths and folktales that will enthrall modern readers.

### **Week Three: *Hernando Cortes' Conquest of Mexico and Francisco Pizarro and the Conquest of the Incas* by Gina DeAngelis**

“Great explorations have sometimes been followed by bloody conquest and enslavement of native populations” (DeAngelis, back cover). The details of the conquests will give students imperative information about how these remarkably different cultures have merged into a modern blend of Latin American ethnicity. Gina DeAngelis has authored a series titled *Explorers of the New World* which contains several small books, and includes two precise and informative accounts of Central and South American conquests by Spain. These 50-page books are equipped with useful glossaries and timelines of information relative to each title.

### **Weeks Four through Six: Reading the novel *Becoming Naomi Leon***

The novel, *Becoming Naomi Leon*, contains twenty-one chapters and an epilogue, which I have divided into eleven sections. We will read the book with the accompaniment of an unabridged dramatized audiobook. This technique proves beneficial in many areas. Reading along with audiobooks allows all students to stay on the same pace. Sometimes students with low

reading levels feel discouraged when they are stressed with struggling through a text. The audiotape breaks through this barrier while increasing interest with dramatic voice interpretations. Each day we will read a section of the book. In addition to reading, students will complete the worksheet assignment that reviews vocabulary and language study, questions their comprehension of the text, and analyzes literary elements and literary devices. I will further encourage students to make a personal connection to the text with discussions that question characters' development, decisions, and changes they undergo. Students will also be expected to relate their personal experiences through quick creative writing activities that prompt them to share similar experiences and to give opinions and thoughts on particular events that took place in the novel.

### **Week Seven: Book Report**

We will conclude reading the novel with a traditional book report. The book report will be organized from a simple outline that covers major literary elements and devices including characterization, theme, setting, mood, and tone. However, the major goal of this book report is to introduce to students the plot diagram and its parts: exposition, rising action, climax, conflict, falling action, and resolution. A plot diagram is a triangular-shaped graphic organizer with the labeled sides mentioned previously. It depicts how the sequence of events that occur in a story develop into the formulation of conflicts and problems and how the characters obtain resolution. This discovery will give students the opportunity to visualize plot development again in the novel after previously experiencing similarities in Pre-Columbian form.

### **LESSON PLANS**

#### **Lesson Plan 1 - Soap Carving**

The following lesson plan was adapted from the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum of Saginaw Valley State University website:

<http://www.svsu.edu/mfsm/educational/tourprogramSC.html>

Additional Soap Carving tips are derived from the Ivory Soap website:

<http://www.ivory.com/fun.htm>

#### ***Objective***

Students will explore a subtractive method of creating sculpture using soap and the grid method transfer.

#### ***Level***

5<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> Grades (adaptable for upper levels)

#### ***Supplies***

- Bar of soft soap, such as *Ivory*
- Woodcraft sticks; paring knife; one or two "manicure" orangewood sticks.
- Paper plate
- Small plastic bag with a seal or plastic wrap

Optional:

- Toothpicks
- Metal spoons and forks
- Pencil and paper for sketching will help students visual their sculptures

### Process

Suggestions from the two websites listed above will help you achieve the best results with your soap carving, minimize errors and make your sculpturing simpler and more fun. These websites provide step-by-step procedures to ensure student success.

### Lesson Plan 2 – Comprehension Questions and Discussion Guide

#### Objectives

Students will analyze characters traits, motivations, conflicts, and the changes undergone as the storyline and plot unfold. Students will also develop their language and vocabulary skills.

#### Materials Needed

Novel *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan  
Loose Leaf Paper  
Pens or Pencils  
Spanish/English Dictionary

#### Procedure

After completing the designated reading, students should be expected to answer comprehension questions to display their understanding of the text. Listed below are vocabulary activities and discussion questions about the Characters, Setting, and Themes of *Becoming Naomi Leon* from the Scholastic.com Authors and Books website:

<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/teachingwithbooks/producthome.jhtml?productID=12576&collateralID=11008&displayName=Discussion%2BGuide>

### LATIN AMERICAN WORD SEARCH

Naomi loved to make lists of things she found interesting. Her favorite lists were composed of interesting words. Use the following list of Spanish words to fill in the blanks below:

Fiesta	Huaraches	Sombrero	Mestizo
Adios	Aztec	Mexico City	Peso
Pinata	Tortilla	Plaza	Bullfight

1. A party in Mexico is called a F \_ \_ \_ \_ A.
2. A paper mache figure filled with candy is a P \_ \_ \_ A.
3. A tasty flat bread made of corn or flour is called a \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ L L A.
4. A large Mexican hat is a \_ \_ M B R \_ \_ O.
5. The \_ Z \_ \_ C Indians settled in Mexico before the Spaniards.
6. The capital of Mexico is \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ Y.
7. A unit of Mexican money is a P \_ \_ \_.
8. A popular sport in Mexico with a man and an animal is a \_ \_ L L \_ \_ G H \_.
9. A M \_ \_ \_ \_ Z O is a race of mixed Indian and Spanish heritage.
10. The P \_ \_ Z \_ is the center of the town.
11. A \_ \_ \_ S means goodbye in Spanish.
12. Mexican sandals are called \_ U A R A \_ \_ \_ \_ S.

Next, let's increase our Spanish vocabulary by completing the following word association list similar to Naomi Leon's. Circle the three words that go together and name the topic the words refer to:

- |              |         |         |          |
|--------------|---------|---------|----------|
| 1. Fiesta    | Pinata  | Adobe   | Plaza    |
| 2. Patio     | Aztec   | Mestizo | Spaniard |
| 3. Huaraches | Rebozos | Chile   | Serape   |

4. Matador	Mole	Madre	Mariachi
5. Casa	Patio	Burro	Plaza
6. Pinata	Iguana	Gato	Perro
7. Mountains	Pottery	Jewelry	Baskets
8. Pelota	Sombrero	Soccer	Bullfighting
9. Pyramids	Temples	Adobe	Peso
10. Uno	Dos	Tres	Four

Answers:

1. Fiesta, Pinata, Plaza – all parts of celebrations
2. Aztec, Mestizo, Spaniards – groups of people of Mexico
3. Huaraches, Rebozo, Serape – clothing
4. Matador, Madre, Mariachi – Spanish titles and professions
5. Casa, Patio, Plaza – Spanish inspired architecture
6. Iguana, Burro, Perro – animals
7. Pottery, jewelry, basket – hand made artifacts
8. Pelota, bullfighting, soccer – sports
9. Pyramids, Temples, Adobe, - Pre-Columbian architecture
10. Uno, dos, tres – numbers

**Discussion Questions**

**Characters**

1. What kind of person is Gram? Why is it important to Gram to keep Naomi and Owen living with her? Why didn't Gram tell the children about Santiago in the beginning?
2. Why does Naomi speak so softly? Does she act differently in school than she does at home? Why is it so easy for her to make friends with Blanca?
3. Why does Owen put tape on his clothes? How does this help him? Why do you think Owen has such a cheerful outlook on life, in spite of his handicaps?

**Setting**

1. What makes life in Lemon Tree so special to Naomi and Owen?
2. Is Naomi's school a safe place for her? Is it a safe place for Owen? Compare the way Owen is treated at school to the way he is treated at the hospital.

**Themes**

1. Which characters act most like a mother in this story? Is it necessary to be related to be a "mother" to someone? In what ways does Skyla act like a mother; and in what ways does she frighten her children?
2. Which are the important friendships portrayed in the story? What does friendship mean to people and how does it affect their lives?
3. At the end of the book, Mr. Marble says that Naomi has grown "from a mouse to a lioness." What did he mean by that? Which other characters in the book change and grow to understand themselves better? Discuss the theme of growth in this story.

**Writing Activities**

Imagine you are Naomi or Owen ten years from now. How do you think their childhood experiences with meeting Skyla, Clive and Santiago has helped them grow? Do you think they would have chosen to live with either parent in during this time? Do you think either of them will decide to live in Mexico in the future?

### Lesson Plan 3: Plot Diagram Pyramid

#### *Objectives*

Students will recognize and analyze story plot, setting, and problem resolution. (TAKS Objective 2; TEKS 6.12 G)

Students will represent text information in different ways such as outline, timeline, or graphic organizer. (TAKS Objective 3; TEKS 6.10 L)

#### *Materials Needed*

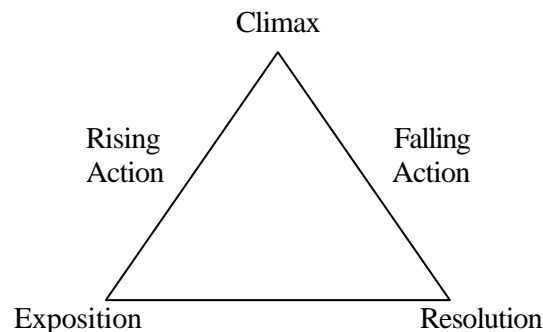
Large bulletin paper or poster board  
Markers  
Pictures of Mesoamerican pyramids  
Plot diagram outline

#### *Procedure*

To begin this lesson, the students will learn the terms and definitions that are associated with the plot diagram. This modified version can be found in the *Novel-Ties* teacher resource booklet. The terms are as follows:

- *Exposition* or explanation of the situation
- *Rising Action* or build up of story
- *Climax or most intense point*
- *Falling Action* works out decisions discovered during the climax
- *Resolution* solves the problem, brings story to an ending

Next, we will discuss and create short, one- to two-sentence summaries of major events that relate to each term after which students will complete a blank plot diagram individually on their own.



Students will then form small groups of four to six members to create our Plot Diagram Pyramids. Each group will be monitored to ensure the participation of all members. This exercise will result in a visual representation of a plot diagram complete with summaries of each section. Since the typical plot diagram takes on the shape of a triangle (see above), I will provide pictures of different pyramids that are styled with the traditional triangular shape. Students have the option of copying these styles or creating their own.

Upon completion of the projects, each group will present their pyramid to the class complete with an explanation of parts, summaries, and decoration. All projects will be displayed in the classroom throughout the course of the unit.

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##### Works Cited

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This original curriculum unit contains pedagogical information and strategies relative to the teaching of reading to middle school students.
- "Becoming Naomi Leon: Discussion Guide." *Scholastic Authors and Books Website*. 2005.  
<<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/teachingwithbooks/producthome.jhtml?productID=12576&collateralID=11008&displayName=Discussion%2Bguide>>.  
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This ninth grade textbook provides information that meets national standards in geography.
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This work is co-authored by the seminar leader, Dr. Rex Koontz, and will provide historical facts and text to supplement each literary piece.
- DeAngelis, Gina. *Francisco Pizarro and the Conquest of the Incas*. New York: Chelsea House, 2001.  
This work provides an historical account of the Francisco Pizarro's defeat of the Incan ruler Atahualpa and the conquest of South American territories by the Spaniards.
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This work provides an historical account of the Hernando Cortes' defeat of the Aztecs ruler Montezuma's and the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards.
- Ferguson, Diana. *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca and Mayan Myths*. London: Collins and Brown Limited, 2000.  
This anthology is a retelling of ancient myths and folktales which will interest modern readers.
- Figueredo, D. H. *Idiot's Guide to Latino History and Culture*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004.  
This title serves as a comprehensive guide to understanding the evolution of modern Latino culture.
- Pohl, John M.D. *John Pohl's Mesoamerica*. <<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/jpcodices/pohlmixtec1.html>>.
- Ryan, Pamela Munoz. *Becoming Naomi Leon*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2004.  
This novel was chosen because it is partly set in Oaxaca, a city in central Mexico that is home to the modern descendants of ancient Mesoamerican Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations.
- . "Becoming Naomi Leon." *Pam Munoz Ryan Website*. 2005. <<http://pammunozryan.com/naomi.html>>.
- Santos, Carol M. et al. *Project CRISS: Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1996.  
This project was designed to help students gain independence in their learning. The strategies are applicable in all subject areas.
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- "Soap Carving Tips." *Ivory Fun*. 1998. <<http://www.ivory.com/fun.htm>>.  
This website offers additional tips on how to carve soap.
- Texas Education Agency. *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Information Booklet Reading Grade 6*. Austin, TX: TEA, 2002.  
This booklet provides much-needed information about expectation and skills that will be assessed by the state of Texas each year to assure proficiency of the students in sixth-grade reading.
- Tibbetts, Sally M. "Review of *Becoming Naomi Leon*." 2005. *Kidsreads.com*.  
<<http://www.kidsreads.com/reviews/0439269695.asp>>  
This website gives good background information of Ryan's novel.

### Supplemental Resources

- Arqueologia Mexicana*. Vol. IX – Num. 53.  
This magazine will serve as a reference to articles, maps and photos of artifacts found in museums world-wide.

*Arqueologia Mexicana: Edicion Especial*

This magazine will serve as a reference to articles, maps and photos of artifacts found in museums world-wide.

*A Coloring Book of Incas, Aztecs and Mayas and other Pre-Columbian Peoples.* Santa Barbara, CA: Bellerphon Books, 1998.

This workbook will give students hands-on experience with coloring and recreating the ancient Pre-Columbian culture.

Green, John. *Life in Ancient Mexico Coloring Book.* Dover Publications, 1991.

This workbook will give students hands-on experience with coloring and recreating the ancient Mexican culture.

Hunt, Norman Bancroft. *Gods and Myths of the Aztecs: The History and Development of Mexican Culture.* Leicester, UK: Brookhampton Press, 1996.

This work includes detailed photographs and historical text that discuss the development of ancient Mexican time culture to modern times.

Leal, Marcia Castro. *Archaeological Mexico, English Edition.* Moncalm Ediciones.

This work includes 220 colorful illustrations and photographs of Pre-Columbian culture from the Pre-Classic to Post-Classic periods.

*Mexico Antiguo 1: Teotihuacan, Chichen-Itza.* INAH.

This video will allow student to see the ancient Mexican ruins and structures, thus giving them a visual connection and promote meaning to the unit.

Montejo, Victor. *Popol Vuh: A Sacred Book of the Maya.* Toronto: Greenwood Books/Douglas & McIntyre, 1999.

This translation of the ancient Mayan legend will be a resource used in our comparison of Pre and Post Columbian literature.

Pohl, John M.D. *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.

This translation of the ancient Mixtec legend will be a resource used in our comparative study of Pre and Post Columbian literature.

Tatum, Charles, ed. *Mexican American Literature.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.

The work provides an anthology of Mexican American literature including novels, poems, plays, and articles that are appropriate for sixth grade readers.